

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1987

THE GREAT WEEKEND

FILMS with

Ford holds up a down-beat film

ECCENTRICS and people with obsessions are fertile subjects for a filmmaker because their paths are seldom those of ordinary men.

Allie Fox (Harrison Ford), central character in Peter Weir's *The Mosquito Coast*, is a fully paid member of the odd ball fraternity.

He is, as Ford has commented, "a monster, a clown, a fool, a genius". More dangerously, he is, as a key passage in the film has it: "A know-it-all who is sometimes right."

When the movie opens Allie is living in rural New England. He is a part-time inventor and a full-time fanatic.

He despises (and says so loudly and often) junk food, urban ugliness, planned obsolescence, the consumer society, television evangelism and most other things about present-day America.

His neighbors think he is crazy and a nuisance but his wife (Helen Mirren), sons Charlie and Jerry (River Phoenix, Jaden Steele) and twin daughters April and Clover (Hilary and Rebecca Gordon) think he is wonderful.

So the family follows without complaint when Allie, the supreme egocentric, packs up and sets sail for the Mosquito Coast of Central America.

There he plans to set up his own utopia, uncorrupted by what he perceives as the pollution of modern civilisation.

With the hard labor of his family and vil-

THE MOSQUITO COAST

Director: Peter Weir

(Hoyts, PG)

★ ★ ★

lagers he turns a decayed settlement on the Beliza River into a model, self-supporting tropical paradise in which Allie is ruler and final arbitrator on all matters.

Rising in its centre, like a vast corrugated iron temple, is the cooling plant. From its mysterious, gurgling innards, blocks of ice are produced.

"Ice", says Allie, "is civilisation." He plans to provide it free to all, even hauling a huge, melting block through mountainous jungle territory to present to a bewildered native tribe.

Allie would seem to have achieved his objective, but like undisciplined visionaries everywhere he does not know when enough is enough.

Soon, his doubtful good sense clouded by his missionary zeal, he over-reaches himself and things begin to go wrong.

The Mosquito Coast, with screenwriter Paul Schrader following the plot of Paul Theroux's compelling and ironic novel reasonably closely, charts the calamities Allie Fox brings on himself and his family by his inability to admit defeat, or even more difficult, that he could be wrong.



HARRISON Ford and River Phoenix in a scene from *The Mosquito Coast*.

This is a strangely down-beat movie in which to find Harrison Ford who, in spite of *Witness* (another Peter Weir film), is more steadily identified with comic book heroes such as Indiana Jones and Han Solo.

Film-goers with expectations of another *Raiders of the Lost Ark* adventure are going to be disappointed, even depressed by *The Mosquito Coast*.

But those who enjoy a fine and intelligent performance from an actor playing against commercial typecasting should be delighted.

Because, although the work of Weir, Schrader, cinematographer John Searle and cast members (in particular River Phoenix as Charlie) deserves high praise, ultimately the

burden of *The Mosquito Coast* falls on Ford's shoulders.

It is to his credit that he contrives to arouse sympathy for a character who is basically an infuriating, pig-headed tyrant so full of self-righteousness he cannot see, or admit, the harm he does.

Without the patina of charm Ford gives to Allie it would be impossible to accept that his family would so willingly, even cheerfully, endure all the hardships his vision imposes.

It also makes their gradual realisation of the flaws in the hero-father more affecting.

The Mosquito Coast is not a film to send patrons home cheering, but it is an intelligent, satisfying and surprisingly entertaining one.